

Any Questions?

by Lt. Matthew Norris

The flight lead's brief covered the sight picture, closure, and tanker-related emergencies. I wasn't very clear on the details surrounding damaged AOA or pitot-probe emergencies, but I felt comfortable with my ability to handle these unlikely events. I was more worried about getting in the basket and staying there.

The departure out of Fallon and rendezvous with the tanker went well. The lead got his plugs first to show me how easy it was. Then the other Hornet pilot went. He jousting with the basket a little bit but not too badly. Then it was my turn. I missed a few times, and the lead told me I needed to keep the closure going. I was throttling back when I got in close, and the bow-wave was moving the basket all over the place. After a couple more tries, I made it into the basket. After a few more off-target attempts, I completed my day plugs. I thought everything went well.

The flight then left the tanker for 15 minutes of night-comfort time. I was confident I had the hang of it and was ready to go. We rejoined the tanker and lead tanked first. The other pilot followed with only minor difficulty, returning to base while the flight lead stayed on

the starboard wing of the tanker. Now it was my turn. I finished my tanking (only a little colorfully).

On the way back, I checked my AOA on the flight control system (FCS) page, and everything seemed normal. We came in for a night break. This is where the fun began. Approaching the 180, the familiar "deedle-deedle" of the master-caution audio warning system brought my attention to the right DDI, which was displaying an FCS caution. Immediately the jet became sluggish. I quickly noticed that, even though the E-bracket (which indicates on-speed in the HUD) was showing me fast, aircraft airspeed was decelerating through 123 knots, and the velocity vector was flashing due to being HUD limited. I went to military power and told my lead, who was in the groove, to take it around.


We joined north of the field and contacted base. We did an AOA check and determined my right AOA probe was inaccurate. Even though there was a split between the left and right AOA indications, the split was not enough for the jet to declare AOA invalid. We were fast becoming fuel critical. After deliberating with base about going to gain override, we

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decided against it in favor of flying a fast approach. I touched down at about 155 knots, bounced a couple of times, and came to an uneventful stop. On post-flight inspection, it was discovered both the AOA and pitot probes on the right side were severely bent.

The AOA system and associated emergencies had definitely been a gray area for me during the brief. For a guy tanking in the Hornet for the first time, the emergency procedures for AOA probe damage should have been crystal clear in my mind. This incident reemphasized the importance of doing a good on-speed AOA check during the landing checklist – a basic, yet critical step for any carrier aviator. I caught the discrepancy, but I easily could have lost control of the jet.

I learned two valuable lessons that night. First, always ORM the hop and prepare to minimize the most likely risks. For me, this should have entailed reading the NATOPS

procedure for AOA probe damage in detail. My second lesson was just as fundamental: When you have a question in the brief, be sure you get it answered. 

Lt. Norris flies with VFA-147.



Photo by SSgt. David W. Richards
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